The influence of popular beliefs about childbirth on fertility patterns in mid-twentieth-century Netherlands

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The Influence of Popular Beliefs about Childbirth on Fertility Patterns in Mid-Twentieth-Century Netherlands

Hilde Bras *

Abstract: «*Der Volksglauben über Geburten als Einflussfaktor auf Fruchtbarkeitsmuster in den Niederlanden Mitte des 20. Jahrhunderts*». Ever since the Princeton European Fertility Project on the decline of fertility, the question of how (changes in) cultural beliefs have influenced the historical fertility transition has been in the forefront of historical demographic research. Previous research has however mostly assessed the influence of religious denomination and has not examined the impact of wider beliefs or 'cultural life scripts'. On the basis of a folklore questionnaire, this article examines the occurrence, content, and geographical patterning of popular beliefs about childbearing in relation to fertility patterns in 1,022 rural Dutch communities during the nineteen forties. Beliefs in isolation and churching of women existed in almost half of all communities, particularly among Catholic populations, while fear of enchantment of infants was still alive in about a fifth of all municipalities. To be sure, such popular beliefs were rapidly vanishing and remnants were still found in isolated and strongly religious areas. A multivariate analysis shows that in communities where beliefs in churching and witchcraft still existed, birth rates were significantly higher. The study shows the salience of including popular beliefs in studies of fertility behavior and fertility decline. Moreover, it extends the concept of cultural life scripts beyond that of age norms to include prescriptions on social contexts, conducts, and practices surrounding important life passages.

Keywords: Cultural life script, popular beliefs, childbirth, fertility, fertility decline.

1. Introduction

Ever since the Princeton European Fertility project on the decline of fertility, the question of how (changes in) cultural beliefs influenced the fertility transitions in Europe and elsewhere has been in the forefront of demographic research. The Princeton Project showed that in regions with more or less the

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same structural characteristics, fertility declined at very different moments in time. Hence, so it was concluded, regional differences in fertility decline could not only be explained by socio-economic variables, but must also have been related to cultural differences. The importance of cultural beliefs in influencing fertility was articulated by Coale (1973) in one of his famous three preconditions for falling marital fertility: "willing, ready and able".

> The "willing" clause stated that: "Fertility must be within the calculus of conscious choice. Potential parents must consider it an acceptable mode of thought and form of behavior to balance advantages and disadvantages before deciding to have another child – unlike, for example, most present-day Hutterites or Amish, who would consider such calculations immoral and consequently do not control marital fertility" (Coale 1973, 65).

The idea of moral acceptability has been particularly employed and refined in terms of the influence of formal religion. Since then a long tradition of research has pointed to the importance of religion for understanding fertility behavior and fertility decline (Lesthaeghe and Wilson 1986; Lesthaeghe and Surkyn 1988; Derosas and Van Poppel 2006; Engelen and Hillebrand 1986; McQuillan 1999, 2004; Goldscheider 1971; but cf. Caldwell and Caldwell 1987; Anderson 1986). However, Coale's contrast between a rational way of thinking about children and the way childbearing is perceived in the 'traditional' groups he mentioned, could have opened up the way for assessing not only the influence of religion, but of cultural life scripts, i.e. beliefs, norms, and values about how lives could and should take place, in general (Boonstra, Bras and Derks 2014).

The notion of life script has been particularly used to denote age norms, such as ideal ages of parenting ('when to start and stop having children'), as well as quantum norms ('how many children') and the sequence in which lives ('spacing of children') should unfold. However, as some historians and anthropologists have argued, in the past not only age norms, but all kinds of other collective expectations, ranging from community norms, religious values and popular beliefs influenced life courses. These beliefs, taboos, rituals and practices could prescribe the age, sequence and quantum of life passages, but also entailed prescriptions about the context, place, conduct, food, clothing and presence of intimates surrounding important life events (Gillis 1996; Van Gennep 1960[1908]). To what extent did cultural life scripts based on popular beliefs and practices influence fertility behavior in a period of fertility decline?

In this contribution I will focus specifically on popular beliefs, practices and rites surrounding childbirth and examine how these 'popular' scripts influenced reproductive behavior. In Christian societies, a strong taboo on childbirth existed, which originated in the early Middle Ages. For the Church Fathers, women were the incarnation of evil and were thus punished by God with painful and bloody deliveries. According to Pope Innocentius II (12th century) "[a] woman conceives with impurity and stench, she delivers with sadness and sorrow, she nurses with anxiety and fear" (De Jager 1981, 28). The taboo on childbirth not

only explains the many (folk) religious rituals surrounding conception, pregnancy and childbirth, but also the numerous popular beliefs, wives' tales, superstitions and magical ideas about this life event, which have persisted well into the twentieth century.[1] To be sure, the borders between religious beliefs, superstitions, popular beliefs and magic were often very vague, particularly in matters of childbearing since it was and often still is considered a semi-religious life event in most cultures (Naaktgeboren 1987, 63).[2]

I will be mainly concerned with beliefs and rituals of incorporation after childbirth: the isolation of women in childbed, the churching of women and the fear for bewitching and protection of newborn children (see section 2). Previous research has shown that popular beliefs around childbirth varied across social class, religious and local lines (Gélis 1987; Naaktgeboren 1987; De Jager 1981). Empirical evidence is however unsystematic and it remains unclear how popular beliefs on childbirth actually influenced fertility behavior. My intention in this paper is first of all to map out these beliefs for the Netherlands and to investigate how they were regionally patterned (Table 2, Cel C) (Boonstra, Bras and Derks 2014). Secondly, I will assess the influence of these beliefs on actual fertility in the life course (Cel D). In order to do so, I draw on information from a folklore questionnaire on beliefs and rituals of pregnancy and childbearing, which was issued in 1941 among about 1,100 respondents in different municipalities across the Netherlands. The questionnaire is part of a larger collection of folklore questionnaires on cultural phenomena in the Netherlands that were sent out between 1934 and 1988 by the Dutch Meertens Institute in Amsterdam.

The next paragraph starts with a discussion of the rituals of childbirth and incorporation. Next, I describe the religious context of the Netherlands between ca. 1880 and 1960, and formulate hypotheses on the likely effects of adherence to popular beliefs and rituals on local fertility patterns. After introducing my data, measures, and methods, I describe the occurrence of beliefs and rituals, their geographical spread and their precise content, such as became evident from the answers to the folklore questionnaire. I then include the degree of adherence to these different beliefs and rituals as independent variables in a multivariate regression of municipal birth rates in which I control for a large

[1] With popular beliefs I understand the whole of representations in which a population believed, which could but did not have to be religiously-related, such as for example the belief in the efficiency of amulets. Superstitions are of a more or less religious nature, but deviate from the official reading of the Scripture. With magic, people tried to force powers outside themselves by using certain actions.

[2] In his study on religion and the decline of magic in 16th and 17th century England, Keith Thomas discovered a close relationship between popular beliefs and the religious ideas of the period. 'In offering an explanation for misfortune and a means to redress at times of adversity, they seemed to be discharging a role very close to that of the established Church and its rivals' (Thomas 1971, ix).

range of other variables influencing fertility. In the concluding section, I discuss my results in the light of historical fertility research and general studies of life course behavior.

2. Background

2.1 Popular Beliefs and Rituals of Childbirth

According to the anthropologist Van Gennep (1960 [1908]),

> the life of an individual in any society is a series of passages from one age to another and from one occupation to another […] for every one of these events there are ceremonies whose essential purpose is to enable the individual to pass from one defined position to another which is equally well defined (2-3).

Passages from one stage of life, or from one position to another, are usually marked by rituals or ceremonies. Van Gennep distinguished three different phases, common to almost all rituals of passage: separation, transition, and incorporation. With regard to the rituals of pregnancy and childbirth, the first rites often segregate the pregnant woman from society, from her family group or sometimes from her sex. Pregnancy itself is a transitional period and has its own (protection) rites facilitating delivery and protecting the mother and child (and sometimes other relatives as well) against evil forces. Other separation procedures might include seclusion, sexual and dietary prohibitions, cessation of economic activity. After the delivery, the woman's incorporation into society and ordinary life is also made in stages. The transitional period thus extends beyond the moment of delivery. The rites of childbirth are intended to reintegrate a woman in the groups to which she belonged and establish her new position in society as a mother (Van Gennep 1960[1908], 44-5). I will now describe three beliefs associated with rituals of incorporation: isolation, churching and beliefs in enchantment of newborns.

2.1.1 The Isolation of Women

Because pregnancy was perceived as an impure condition, it was common (at least among Catholics, but also in many Protestant denominations) that the mother and her baby isolated themselves for 40 days after delivery (in the twentieth century, this period of isolation was reduced to 10 days). The reason was not only to protect the outside world against their impurity, but also for the mother and child to be protected themselves (also the newborn was considered impure!) against harmful influences. Fear of the evil eye existed in the whole of Europe in the 15th and 16th centuries and this belief persisted for a long time (Gélis 1984). Pregnant women often wore amulets to protect themselves against bad luck and the evil eye and to guarantee an advantageous delivery.

These amulets, sometimes blessed by the Pope, contained red corals or a picture of the Holy Anna on a red cord (red was seen as offering protection against evil forces) (Gélis 1984; Naaktgeboren 1987, 79-80). During the period of isolation, women were not allowed to have sexual intercourse, to receive visits from menstruating women, or to visit or receive visits from other women who had just delivered. Only female neighbors, aunts and grandparents were allowed to come for maternity visits. The mother was given luxurious food stuffs to regain strength, such as currant and ginger bread. The period of isolation ended with churching.

2.1.2 The Churching of Women

Churching, a custom going back to Jewish purification rites, was the ultimate ritual of incorporation of the mother. In the Christian tradition, the churching of women is the ceremony wherein a blessing is given to mothers after the recovery from childbirth. Usually this took place on the fortieth day after confinement. The ceremony includes thanksgiving for the woman's survival of childbirth, and is performed even when the child is stillborn, or has died unbaptized. The Christian ritual draws on the imagery and symbolism of the Purification of the Virgin, celebrated as Candlemas on February 2nd (Chisholm 1911; Herbermann 1913). "In our society", according to Van Gennep (1960 [1908], 46-7),

> the social return from childbirth coincides with the physiological return. Our ceremony on this occasion is known as the 'churching of women', and, although its character is more mundane than magical-religious, it is easy to see what it must have been during the Middle Ages – the woman's reintegration into her family, her sex group, and her society.

Churching was practiced in the Netherlands until around 1960. How it was conducted differed by region. In most cases the woman was guided, by holding the stole of the priest, into the church at the end of Holy Mass, carrying a burning candle in her left hand. Furthermore, special prayers were recited, linked to this custom. After this rite she was adopted back in the church community and could participate again in ecclesiastical celebrations. The blessing also included thanksgiving for the new life.

2.1.3 Beliefs in Bewitching and Protection of the Newborn Child

Where the pregnant woman was seen as impure that impurity was also transmitted to the child, who was consequently also subject to certain taboos and whose first transitional period (HB: until baptism) coincided with the mother's last transition preceding her *social return* from childbirth. "The various rites of protection against the evil eye, infections, diseases, all kinds of evil spirits, and so forth are good simultaneously for mother and child" (Van Gennep 1960 [1908], 50). In Christian societies, newborn children were baptized as soon as possible: among Catholics within a few days, among protestants within six

weeks. Particularly among Catholics, children could not have a funeral when they were not baptized. Only the souls of baptized children could go to heaven; therefore, children were sometimes baptized in the womb in order to prevent their souls from wandering. Baptism was thus used as a magical ritual by both Catholics and Calvinists. As a way of protection against enchantment and bewitching before the child was baptized, amulets were used. A crucifix or scapular was often hung in the cradle and the mother made a cross with Holy water over the head of the baby to protect it against evil powers. These popular beliefs would have lasted in some regions of the Netherlands up until the twentieth century (Naaktgeboren 1987, 81).

2.2 Setting and Hypotheses[3]

During the first half of the twentieth century, the Netherlands was a country of mixed religion: the southern provinces were almost completely Catholic, while to the north of the big rivers the Reformed Church dominated, albeit with sizable Catholic enclaves. In 1886, a major schism in the Reformed Church took place, with many Orthodox Protestants following the reverend Abraham Kuyper. They formed their own congregation and set up their own political party, newspaper, schools and university (Van Zanden and Van Riel 2004). The Church split occurred most clearly in the *Protestant* (or *Bible*) *Belt*, an area with high proportions of Orthodox Protestants stretching across the Netherlands from Zeeland in the southwest to the northwestern part of Overijssel in the east, almost exactly along the dividing line "Rome-Reformation", between Catholic and Protestant Netherlands (Knippenberg, Stoppelenburg and Van der Wusten 1989), where once the front line during the Twelve-year Truce (1609-1621) of the revolt of the northern Low Countries against the Spanish King had been (Knippenberg 2003, 98). Along this belt, both Catholics and Protestants were feverously dogmatic in their beliefs; they possessed what the Dutch sociologist Van Heek (1956) has called "a front mentality".

The Catholic Church exerted a strong pro-natalist pressure on married couples in the Netherlands, like in other European countries (Van Heek 1956; Van Poppel 1992; Engelen and Kok 2003; Van Bavel and Kok 2005). The central reason for this was their zealous opposition towards birth control within marriage. In predominantly Catholic communities, paternal authority and the power position of the local clergy were strong, which made it almost impossible for couples not to compel to the ideal of large families.

[3] This section has been based on Suanet and Bras 2011, 318-9.

Figure 1: Map of the Netherlands by Province around 1920

"Front line" Rome-Reformation Dutch Bible Belt.

The Catholic clergy fulfilled numerous religious and social functions in local communities, from intermediary of God to marriage broker and employer. Orthodox Protestants adhered to roughly the same morality and childbearing norms as Catholics (Van Heek 1956; Van Poppel 1985). Although opposition towards birth control abated somewhat at the end of the nineteenth century in the more liberal Protestant churches, Catholics and Orthodox Protestants stayed virulently opposed to birth control within marriage up until the 1920s. According to Lesthaeghe and Wilson (1986), religious opposition against secularization is likely to have contributed to the slow acceptance of birth control.

Despite their commonalities in mentality, Catholics and Orthodox Protestants differed with respect to which these doctrines actually had an impact on fertility behavior. In the (Orthodox) Protestant Churches, the atmosphere was more individualistic and egalitarian than in the Catholic Church (Engelen and Hillebrand 1986). Additionally, in Catholicism, the main function of marriage was reproduction, whereas mutual support and aid between spous-

es was stressed by the Dutch Reformed Church (Van Poppel 1985; McQuillan 1999; Van Bavel and Kok 2005). Finally, the supervision on premarital sexuality was more efficient among Catholics than among Protestants. Percentages of enforced marriages among Protestants, especially among some Orthodox Protestant denominations, were higher than among Catholics, and the average age of such enforced marriages was always lower than of "normal" marriages (Engelen and Meyer 1979; Kok 1990). Previous research has shown that in the nineteenth century, liberal Protestants had the lowest number of children, followed by Orthodox Protestants and atheists. Catholics had on average the largest families (Engelen and Kok 2003; Janssens 1998; Lehrer 2004; Kok and Van Bavel 2006).

During the period under study, the three main religious groups Catholics, liberal Protestants and Orthodox Protestants were strictly separated by the system of pillarization ('verzuiling'), i.e. the complete segregation of society founded on religious and ideological delineations (Lijphart 1968). Although there was a clear north-south division in religious context, the percentages of each of the religious groups differed by community. However, individuals can be expected to be sensitive to the norms and behaviors concerning childbearing of the dominant religious group in the community (Suanet and Bras 2010; Van Poppel and Nelissen 1999). Therefore, the norms and values of the dominant religious group in a community concerning reproductive behavior are likely to have had an impact on all community members, even those not belonging to this principal religious group. This is what the Dutch demographer Hofstee (1981) has called 'asymmetrical tolerance'.

Taking the preceding into account, I expect that popular beliefs about isolation and churching of women and bewitching of children might have existed more in the predominantly Catholic communities in the southern and eastern part of the Netherlands and in the Bible Belt Area where many Orthodox Protestants and Catholics lived. Additionally, I hypothesize that in communities where these popular beliefs still held sway, birth rates tended to be higher than in places where this was less the case.

3. Data, Measures, and Methods

Data on rituals of pregnancy and childbirth were derived from the Folklore Questionnaires [De volkskundevragenlijsten] (1989), which were collected by the Dutch Meertens Institute between 1934 and 1988. These questionnaires were sent out to approximately 1,200 informants from mainly rural municipalities scattered all over the Netherlands. The informants filled out the questionnaires with pen or pencil, while some were typed out. With informants usually being elderly persons in a municipality the information broadly covers the first half of the twentieth century.

Being as systematically collected for the whole of the Netherlands, such qualitative information on rituals and customs in their local contexts is hard to find in any other source, though the questionnaires also have their limitations. The main problem is that informants had to report back about beliefs that were supposed to be held generally or by certain religious or social groups in the municipality. The larger the municipality, the more difficult it was for one respondent to be aware of the existence of extant beliefs or customs. However, in pre-war Dutch rural municipalities, community cultures were still strong, and although divided across class and religious lines they were often quite homogeneous. Moreover, the informants were often village notables, like heads of schools, teachers and notaries, who came into contact with people from all classes and denominations. Another limitation was that the answers to the questions were not closed or pre-defined, so that informants were basically free in how to respond to a question. This has the advantage of allowing for lengthy, interesting observations, but among the disadvantages are the very dissimilar answers which had to be standardized and coded by the researcher afterwards. Questions of which the answers were left open also posed a problem, for it was not always clear whether the informant had not answered because he or she didn't know the answer or whether the answer was negative and there was just nothing to report.

Table 1: Questions about Churching, Cursing of Children and Isolation of Women from the Folklore Questionnaire #7 (1941)

Nr	Sub	Question
12a		Is "churching" of the mother after childbirth a custom?
	I	Among Protestants?
	II	Among Roman-Catholics?
12b	I	Is this a particular religious feast? or
	II	Does it take place in connection to the normal mass/service?
12c		Does churching coincide with baptism?
12d		How long after childbirth does churching take place?
12e		When one can choose among different days of the week, what day is preferred?
12f		How is churching called in the dialect of your community?
13a		Do people believe that a small child can be disadvantaged by cursing, enchantment or witchcraft etc.?
13b		How can one protect a child against this?
	I	Does one make the sign of the cross?
	II	Does one hang an amulet around the child or on the bed or the cradle?
	III	Do spells help against this? If so, which ones?
14a		Is the mother forbidden to leave the house before churching?
14b		Is the mother forbidden to enter certain chambers or spaces before churching? (e.g. the barns, the street etc.)
14c		Does the mother have to take care of herself and the child in another way?
14d		Why does the mother have to do all this?
14e		Is this generally done or only by certain individuals?

Source: Folklore Questionnaires Meertens Institute.

For this paper, questionnaire 7 on popular and religious beliefs related to pregnancy, birth and infant care, which was sent out in 1941, was used. The answers to this questionnaire were received back between 1941 and 1950. The questionnaire contains questions regarding among others, 'the month or season of the year considered most advantageous / disadvantageous for childbirth', the question of 'who put the child in the cradle' (the stork, the midwife etc.), 'whether people in the municipality believed that infants could be disadvantaged by curses and witchcraft', 'how many weeks after giving birth the mother had to visit the church'. I used questions concerning 1) the churching of women among Roman Catholics and Protestants; 2) the isolation of women and 3) the belief in cursing and bewitching of young infants (see Table 1).

The answers of the informants on these sub questions were entered into the computer and tagged with municipality codes. For this paper, the sub questions 12aI, 12aII, 13a and 14a were coded, using categories varying from "yes", "somewhat", "in the past" to "no" or "unknown or not applicable". The occurrence of the beliefs and customs was then depicted on maps visualizing the 1022 Dutch municipalities reported on.[4] Moreover, a qualitative analysis of the answers was performed to understand what they entailed substantively about the beliefs or customs in a certain municipality or larger region.

In a next step, the four coded variables were entered as independent variables in a linear multivariate regression of municipal birth rates, which were taken from the Historical Database of Dutch Municipalities (HDNG). Originally, informants were given a Kloeke code by the Meertens Institute. In order to link the questionnaire data to the municipal-level data from the HDNG, Kloeke codes were converted to CBS municipality codes. As control variables, other municipal level variables were included, charting the family system in the community (percentage of co-resident kin and existence of impartible inheritance), level of economic development (percentage in agriculture, percentage in trade and traffic, percentage assessed for national income tax, percentage of cars), the religious composition (percentage of Roman Catholics, percentage of voters for the Orthodox Protestant Party, percentage of non-believers) (see Table 2).

In almost half of the communities, churching of Catholic women still took place in the nineteen forties or had taken place in the recent past. Among Protestants this was only the case in a third of all municipalities. Isolation of women after childbirth existed in almost half of all communities. In contrast, in only one-fifth of the municipalities popular beliefs in bewitching existed. In the next section we will take a closer look at these beliefs and see what they entailed and how they were patterned geographically.

[4] All maps (except the first) are produced by Thijs Hermsen <www.placesandspaces.nl>.

Table 2: Means and Percentages of the Variables used in the Linear Regression Analysis

	Mean or %	Std. Deviation
Birth rate (1941)	21.26	4.46
Percentage of co-resident kin (1949)	12.32	5.49
Impartible inheritance (1=yes; 0=partible inheritance)	8%	
Percentage in agriculture (1930)	47.77	25.63
Percentage in trade and traffic (1930)	20.24	11.22
Percentage assessed for national income tax (1933)	33.67	13.94
Percentage of cars (1935)	0.86	0.43
Percentage of Roman Catholics (1930)	32.13	37.18
Percentage of voters for Orthodox Protestant Party ('SGP') (1935)	0.20	0.73
Percentage of non-believers (1930)	7.84	10.41
Churching of women among Roman Catholics		
Yes, somewhat, previously	46.28%	
No (ref.)	21.53%	
Unknown or not applicable	32.19%	
Churching of women among Protestants		
Yes, somewhat, previously	35.71%	
No (ref.)	43.94%	
Unknown or not applicable	20.35%	
Belief in cursing and bewitching of newborn child		
Yes, somewhat, previously	22.31%	
No	63.31%	
Unknown	14.38%	
Mothers have to remain inside the house before churching		
Yes, somewhat, previously	45.21%	
No	38.16%	
Unknown	16.63%	

Source: Folklore Questionnaires Meertens Institute and Historical Database of Dutch Municipalities (N=1022).

4. Results

4.1 Popular Beliefs about Childbearing

To what extent did the isolation and churching of women and the belief in the enchantment of newborn children still exist in the Netherlands around the middle of the twentieth century? I will shed light on three aspects for which information could be derived from the questionnaires: 1) the distribution of the occurrence of these beliefs according to the answers of the informants; 2) how the occurrence was geographically patterned across the Netherlands; and 3) what these customs entailed substantively according to the reports of the informants.

The question about the existence of churching of Protestant mothers was answered by 875 or 79% of the informants (see Table 3). Of the group that reported an answer, more than 54% stated that it did not exist in their community, a third answered that it did exist and almost 14% replied that the practice of churching only existed somewhat, only among Orthodox Protestants or was a ritual that now belonged to the past.

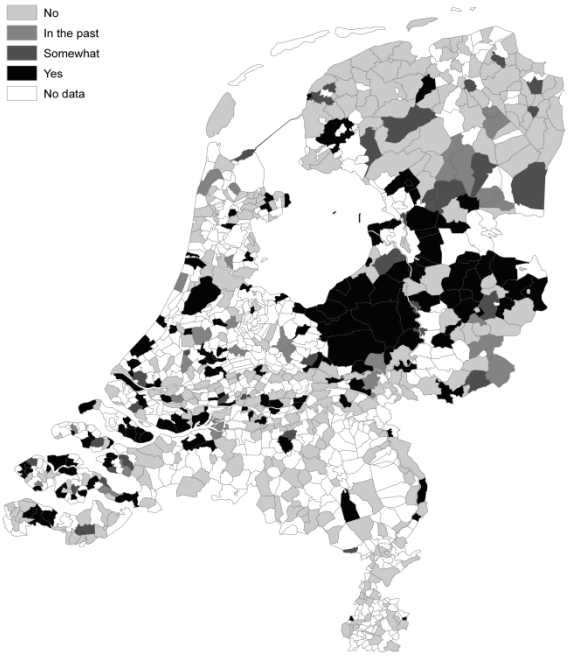
Table 3: Churching of Women among Protestants

		Frequency	%	Valid %
Valid	No, doesn't exist in this municipality	479	43.3	54.7
	In the past	65	5.9	7.4
	Somewhat	45	4.1	5.1
	Yes	275	24.8	31.4
	Only among Orthodox Protestants	11	1	1.3
	Total	875	79	100
Missing	No protestants in the community	35	3.2	
	Not filled in	178	16.1	
	Unknown	19	1.7	
	Total	232	21	
Total		1107	100	

Source: Meertens Institute: Folklore Questionnaire nr. 7 (1941), Question 12.a.I.

The map in Figure 2 clearly shows that in the nineteen forties churching among Protestant mothers occurred mainly in the Bible Belt area of the Netherlands, stretching from the Zeeland islands in the southwest to the province of Overijssel in the east. Particularly in the region of the "Veluwe" (belonging to the province of Gelderland), where many Orthodox Protestants lived, this ritual was still strongly alive. In the northwestern province of North-Holland and in the northern provinces of Friesland and Groningen, which also had substantial proportions of Protestants, the practice had already faded or belonged to the past, while in many communities the practice was not known at all. Many respondents stated that churching was a ritual that occurred particularly among Orthodox Protestants and very religious and churchgoing people. Some North-Holland informants stated for instance that their village was "Liberal Protestant" and that the church life of the Protestants in their village was very minimal and that churching thus did not occur. Also some respondents from the province of Groningen stated that the largest part of the population there didn't go to church and little of them let their child be baptized (even less than 1%). The southern provinces of North-Brabant and Limburg of course did not have many Protestants, so it not strange that not many informants reported the existence of Protestant churching.

Figure 2: Churching of Mothers among Protestants in the Netherlands (1940s)



What did churching among Protestants actually entail according to the informants? Often, churching coincided with the baptism of the child. Only when the child had died, there was a separate churching of the mother (Overijssel). The churching ritual was often performed as an extension of the ordinary services in contrast to the Catholic ritual. Among Protestants, the mother often sat alone in the baptism pew and the preacher remembered her in prayer and/or addressed her in his speech. During the churching, intercessions were asked for mother and child. These intercessions coincided often with baptism. Commonly, Protestant churching took place on the first Sunday after the sixth week after the delivery (when churching coincided with baptism) also depending on the opportunity to baptize (in the liberal Protestant church baptism was possible once a month). Only Orthodox Protestants baptized their children earlier (in the first Sunday service) and thus the mother could not be present and was churched separately. Also the weather played a role; some informants reported that churching took place after one month in the summer and after two months in the winter (Gelderland).

Clearly, the ritual of churching was more alive among Catholics than among Protestants as Table 4 shows. Whereas one-third of those that responded on the question of Protestant churching confirmed its existence, almost two-thirds of

the respondents that answered the question on Catholic churching, responded positively. Another difference was that the practice among Catholics was still very much alive. Only very few informants stated that it had become a marginal custom among Catholics or belonged to the past.

Table 4: Churching of Women among Roman Catholics

		Frequency	%	Valid %
Valid	No, doesn't exist in this municipality	230	20.8	30.4
	In the past	6	0.5	0.8
	Somewhat	4	0.4	0.5
	Yes	517	46.7	68.3
	Total	757	68.4	100
Missing	No Roman Catholics in the community	163	14.7	
	Not filled in	166	15	
	Unknown	21	1.9	
	Total	350	31.6	
Total		1107	100	

Source: Meertens Institute: Folklore Questionnaire nr. 7 (1941), Question 12a.II.

Among Catholics, churching and baptism were separate events. Right after childbirth, often during the newborn's first or second day, the child was baptized. Churching of the mother on the other hand took place from 14 days after childbirth until 3, 4, 5 or 6 weeks after delivery, depending also on the health of the woman in childbed. Churching was often celebrated as a separate festivity, which took place as a separate mass or as a ritual before or after Mass. If children were baptized they often received a "dot" (a patch filled with white sugar) in their mouth. The dry-nurse was present at the ceremony. The grandmother or female neighbor, who brought the child to be baptized, had to provide the dot. Around 1890 it was common that the mother wore a black veil at her churching (Gelderland). Churching among Roman Catholics was not restricted to a Sunday but could take place on all days of the week. Sometimes the devotion of the mother, for a particular saint played a role (for example Saturday, day of the Holy Virgin; Wednesday Saint Joseph day etc.). According to an informant from Limburg, the ceremony started with the priest meeting the mother at the entrance of the church. With a burning candle she is guided by the priest, whose scapular she holds, to the altar where a number of prayers are performed. After the church ceremony the nearest female neighbors (ca. ten of them) were offered coffee. This was called "Kindjeskermis" [baby carnival], but this custom was not practiced anymore in the forties.

Figure 3: Churching of Women among Roman Catholics in the Netherlands (1940s)

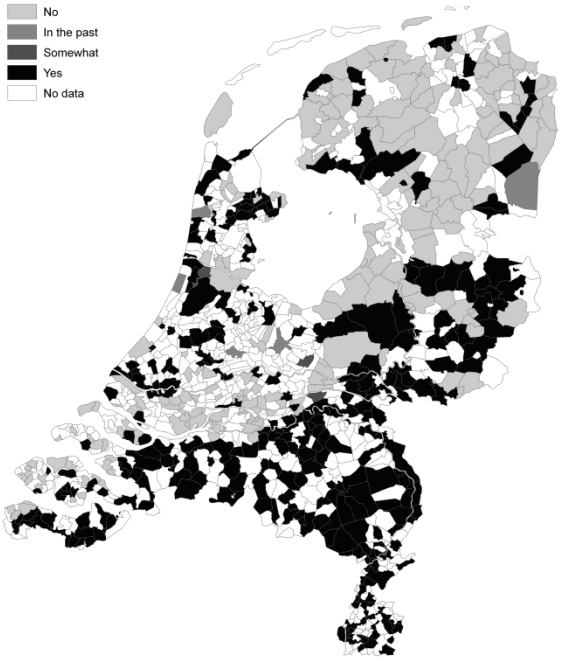


Table 5: Mothers Have to Remain Inside the House Before Churching

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Valid	No, doesn't exist in this municipality	418	37.8	44.9
	In the past	75	6.8	8.1
	Somewhat	54	4.9	5.8
	Yes	208	18.8	22.3
	Only among Protestants	4	0.4	0.4
	Only among Roman Catholics	32	2.9	3.4
	May leave the house but not the courtyard	61	5.5	6.6
	May leave the house but no go to visits and parties	79	7.1	8.5
	Total	931	84.1	100
Missing	Not filled in	171	15.4	
	Unknown	5	0.5	
	Total	176	15.9	
Total		1107	100	

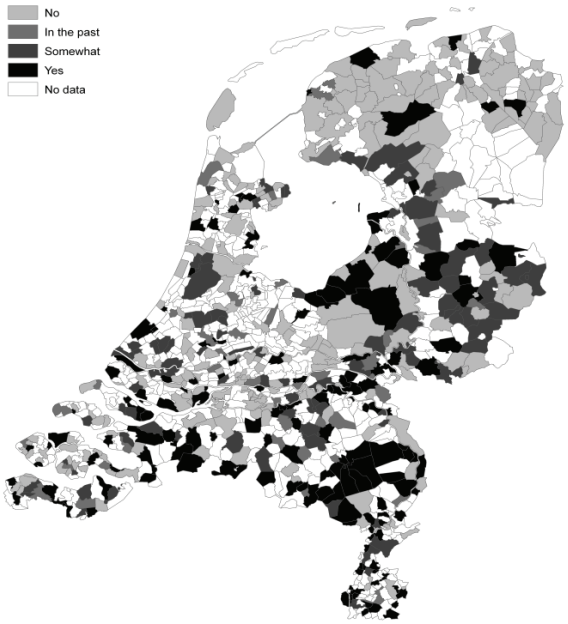
Source: Meertens Institute: Folklore Questionnaire nr. 7 (1941), Question 14a.

Related to the practice of churching of women was the belief that mothers had to remain inside the house prior to this ritual (isolation). A much higher per-

centage of informants – about 45% – than in the case of the questions on churching stated that isolation didn't take place in their community. Those who did, indicated that women had to remain inside the house (22%), could leave the house but had to remain within the area marking the roof gutter or the courtyard (6.6%), while others stated that she could leave but had to refrain from visits and parties (8.5%). There were also respondents who stated that this was a custom practiced primarily among Roman Catholics.

The map in Figure 4 shows that this custom was mostly practiced along the "front line", in the "Peel" area located in the southeastern part of the province of North-Brabant, and in the southern province of Limburg. Again – as with the rite of churching among Protestant women – we can observe that in the eastern provinces the custom was already fading away in the forties in the sense that it was less strictly performed (women could leave the house but not go on visits or to parties). In the northwest of the Netherlands (Groningen, Friesland and North-Holland) the belief in isolation was least present.

Figure 4: Belief that Mothers Have to Remain Inside the House Before Churching, The Netherlands (1940s)



What did this belief actually involve? An informant from North-Brabant stated that

> among Protestants, the father and mother go for the official baptismal ceremony to the church. When the mother is recovered from childbirth she goes her normal way, also before churching. Among Roman Catholics, the mother does not go in public because she wants to implore blessings for herself and the child. Her first course will be to God's house.

Another one mentioned that the mother will not pass a church. One respondent stated that there is no prescription about this custom but that mothers simply do not shop or conduct visits in the village or wherever when it is more than a few minutes away. Entering the (public) street was seen as improper behavior. One of the informants stated that farming women stuck to this practice, while among the middle classes it was not so strictly practiced anymore.

A final question concerned whether people in the community believed that a small child could be disadvantaged by cursing, enchantment, and bewitching. In contrast to the religious rites around churching, popular beliefs in bewitching were much less alive in the 1940s. Almost three-quarters of the respondents that answered this question stated that it did not exist in their municipality. According to 14% of the informants, this was a phenomenon that had been present in the past; most stated it had been alive until 40 or 50 years ago and had vanished around the turn of the twentieth century. Some 4% stated it was a marginal phenomenon or could be found only among the Roman Catholic population. Some 8% (80 informants) stated that folk beliefs in witchcraft were still alive in their community, which is still striking for a mid-twentieth century western society (Table 6).

Table 6: Belief in Cursing and Bewitching of Newborn Child

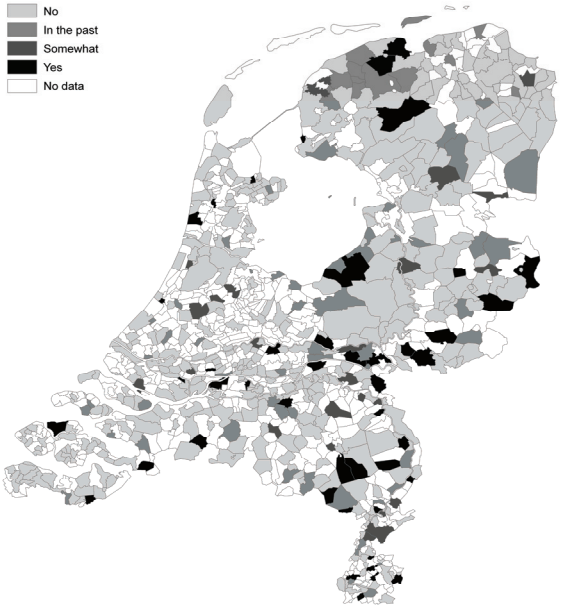
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Valid	No	705	63.7	73.2
	In the past	137	12.4	14.2
	Somewhat	34	3.1	3.5
	Yes	80	7.2	8.3
	Only among Roman Catholics	7	0.6	0.7
	Total	963	87	100
Missing	Not filled in	132	11.9	
	Unknown	12	1.1	
	Total	144	13	
Total		1107	100	

Source: Meertens Institute: Folklore questionnaire nr. 7 (1941), Question 13a.

Figure 4 shows where remnants of these folk beliefs could be found: i.e. the diagonal front line is again visible and it is particularly on this line and to the southeast of it where folk religion still held sway, particularly in southeast North-Brabant, southern Limburg, and in the isolated eastern regions of Twente

and the Achterhoek. Belief in cursing of children was also alive in the northern part of the province of Friesland and in northwest Overijssel near the "Veluwe". These regions have their isolated location and lack of infrastructure in common. They were also regions marked by strong kinship ties and neighborhood bonds, relatively high percentages of multigenerational households, and a cohesive community culture (Bras and Van Tilburg 2007; Wichers 1965).

Figure 5: Belief in Bewitching of Newborn Child, The Netherlands (1940s)



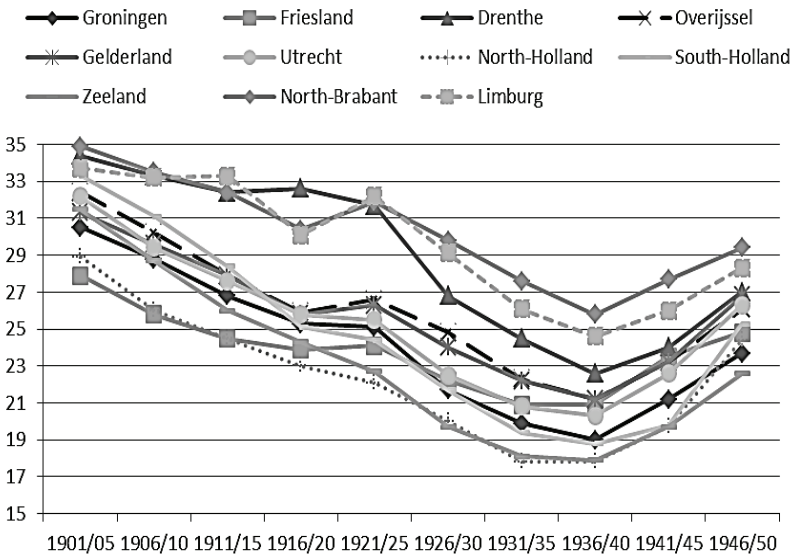
What exactly did popular beliefs around bewitching consist of? One recurring fear was that a bad woman or an old ugly man touched the child, and thereby tainted it. As a remedy one had to touch that person back at a position higher than where he or she had touched the child. Many respondents told anecdotes about women who visited a newborn child and after the maternity visit the child became ill. It was than concluded that the child had been bewitched by the woman. An informant from North-Brabant stated that the "kwaoj hand" [evil hand] was often found guilty of illnesses and accidents. Particularly still unbaptized children ("Adam's children"), still in the power of the devil were vulnerable subjects. To get rid of the charm, the local priest was often consulted who knew special prayers for this purpose. But also the mother could be disadvantaged by witchcraft (if she was not churched yet). Many informants also reported about wreaths that were found in the pillows of infants' cradles, which had to be burned. To protect children against witchcraft a number of

practices existed ranging from making three times a cross with holy water during the morning and night or depicting a cross on the forehead of the child when it was put in the cradle. Parents often hanged amulets (consisting for instance of moles' feet in a satchel), crosses, little angels, scapular medals or medals of Our Lady, in the cradle. This was done, according to many informants, to implore God's blessings against the Devil, not against witchcraft or enchantment.

4.2 The Influence of Popular Beliefs on Local Birth Rates

To what extent was the existence of popular beliefs and customs on childbirth in communities associated with local fertility levels? At the moment of the questionnaire, the Netherlands were experiencing the baby boom of the nineteen forties. We can see in Figure 6 that the same provincial differentials that were apparent in the decline of fertility during the first three decades of the twentieth century remained in the boom period. The fall in family size began in the Northwest of the country and gradually spread from there to the Southeast (Boonstra and Van der Woude 1984). Particularly in the southern provinces of Limburg and North-Brabant, fertility remained high well into the twentieth century.

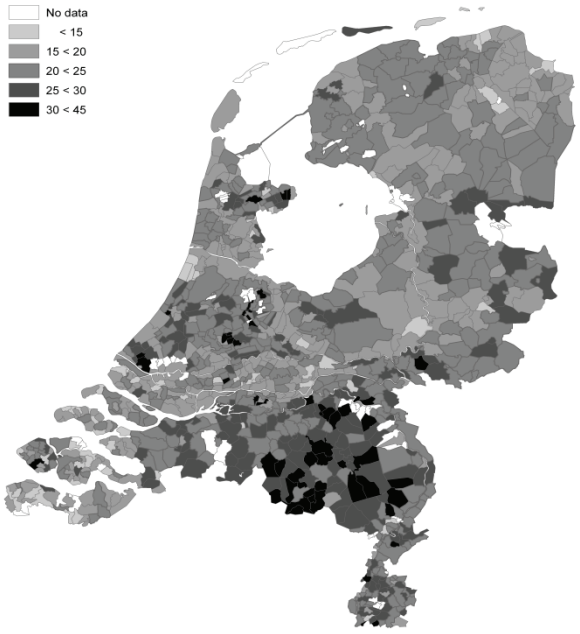
Figure 6: Birth Rates in the Netherlands, by Province (1900-1950)



Source: Based on Hofstee, Een korte demografische geschiedenis van Nederland van 1800 tot heden. Haarlem: Fibula, p.122-3.

Figure 7 shows however that birth rates were not homogeneous, but strongly differed across municipalities within provinces. Still it is clear that certain regions, such as the Catholic region of the Peel in the southeastern part of the province of North-Brabant had many communities with high birth rates. To what extent did the existence of certain popular beliefs explain differences in fertility behavior among communities over and above its religious composition? Did popular life scripts about childbirth have an effect on fertility behavior?

Figure 7: Birth Rates in the Netherlands by Municipality in 1941



To investigate the association between (folk) religious beliefs and actual fertility behavior a multivariate linear regression analysis was performed (Table 7). In order to examine whether the influence of popular beliefs and practices was perhaps related to kinship and family systems, economic factors, and religious composition of the community, stepwise models were estimated. Model 1 shows the influence of the indicators of family systems, i.e. the existence of impartible inheritance in a community and the percentage of co-residing kin, on the municipal birth rates in 1941. Both variables were significantly associated with birth rates. Co-residing kin might have stimulated fertility by offering support or exerting pro-natal social influence. In places where impartible inheritance was practiced, birth rates were significantly lower. In such areas the fact that the parental home was not divisible, but transferred to one heir put a brake on fertility.

In Model 2 indicators of the opportunity structure and the level of welfare and economic development are entered. Compared to communities with a large industrial sector, places with high percentages employed in agriculture or in trade and traffic have strangely enough significantly lower birth rates. Particularly the finding for agricultural communities is counter-intuitive. The variables measuring the percentage of the population assessed for national income tax and the percentage of cars show that besides socio-economic structure, the level of welfare is also associated with fertility. In wealthy communities with high levels of economic development and consumption, birth rates were significantly lower, corroborating structural explanations of fertility decline.

Model 3 includes the religious composition of the population, assessing the effects of the percentage of Roman Catholics, Orthodox Protestants and non-believers. We had expected that particularly the share of Catholics would have had a large positive influence on the birth rates, since it is known that Catholics were laggards in the (Dutch) fertility transition. Surprisingly, we do not find a significant effect. Orthodox Protestantism appears to be associated with lower rather than higher birth rates. Another unexpected result is the fact that places with high shares of non-believers had significantly higher birth rates. Entering religious composition changes the effects of the kin and economic variables in a number of ways. First, the effect of impartible inheritance is no longer significant. Moreover, the positive effect of co-residence of kin now changes direction; it now negatively influences fertility. This is a consequence of the fact that Catholic communities were also places with relatively high shares of co-resident kin. By entering religious composition the negative effect of the percentage employed in agriculture is no longer significant. Here too the correlation between Catholicism and agriculture plays a role. Still the effect of Catholicism on birth rates is not significant suggesting that there is an omitted variable causing variance among Catholic communities.

In Model 4 we enter the indicators of popular beliefs, i.e. attitudes to isolation and churching of mothers and bewitching of newborn children. The results show that popular beliefs and rituals matter, independent of the mere religious composition of a place. In communities where Catholic women were still churched, birth rates were significantly higher than in places where this was not the case. In communities where popular beliefs on cursing and bewitching existed, birth rates were also higher than in places where these folk beliefs did not occur. The effect of the belief in witchcraft is fairly strong (beta = 0.100) and highly significant.

Table 7: Results of the Linear Regression Analysis of Municipal Birth Rates in the Netherlands (1941)

	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3			Model 4		
Covariates	B	Beta	sig.	B	Beta	sig.	B	Beta	sig.	B	Beta	sig.
Percentage of co-resident kin	0.194	0.240	0.000	0.083	0.103	0.003	-0.135	-0.167	0.000	-0.137	-0.169	0.000
Impartible inheritance (no=ref.)	-1.590	-0.101	0.002	-1.571	-0.097	0.003	0.025	0.002	0.958	0.058	0.004	0.904
Occupational Structure (% industry=ref.)												
Percentage in agriculture				-0.024	-0.138	0.002	-0.003	-0.015	0.702	0.000	0.000	0.994
Percentage in trade and traffic				-0.098	-0.247	0.000	-0.070	-0.177	0.000	-0.071	-0.177	0.000
Percentage assessed for national income tax				-0.039	-0.122	0.002	-0.042	-0.132	0.000	-0.039	-0.121	0.001
Percentage of cars				-2.071	-0.199	0.000	-1.902	-0.183	0.000	-1.960	-0.188	0.000
Percentage of Roman Catholics							-0.224	-0.037	0.180	0.045	0.373	0.000
Percentage of Orthodox Protestant voters							-0.030	-0.070	0.030	-0.236	-0.038	0.157
Percentage of non-believers							0.053	0.438	0.000	-0.029	-0.069	0.039
Churching of Catholic women (no=ref.)												

Table 7 continued...												
Yes, somewhat, previously										0.858	0.096	0.021
Unknown or no Catholics										0.326	0.034	0.323
Churching of Protestant women (no=ref.)												
Yes, somewhat, or previously										0.201	0.022	0.468
Unknown or no Protestants										0.600	0.054	0.079
Belief in bewitching new-borns (no=ref.)												
Yes, somewhat, or previously										1.071	0.100	0.000
Unknown										0.447	0.035	0.207
Mother home before churching (no=ref.)												
Yes, somewhat, previously										-0.067	-0.008	0.814
Unknown										0.535	0.045	0.125
Constant	18.968		0.000	26.58		0.000	26.118		0	25.141		0.000
N	1057			1023			1022			1022		
F	27.334			35.79			57.971			33.224		
Adjusted R^2	4.8%			17%			33.40%			34.90%		

Source: As in Table 2.

Including popular beliefs in the regression not only increases the explained variance of the model, but also changes the effects of religious composition. In the model including popular beliefs, the effect of the proportion of Catholics on birth rates now becomes positive and significant, which is what we expected to find in the first place. This means that a variance of Catholic communities existed, differing in the strictness of their application of, or adherence to, semi-religious beliefs and practices (of which churching is a proxy) and in their incorporation of elements of popular culture. Moreover, the effect of the proportion of Orthodox Protestants is no longer significant and the influence of the share of non-believers is now negatively related to birth rates in a community. Thus also highly Orthodox and secularized places varied substantively in terms of the popular beliefs, rites and practices alive.

5. Conclusion and Discussion

In this contribution I traced popular beliefs about childbearing in different communities across the Netherlands and examined how they influenced fertility behavior. The purpose for doing so was twofold. First of all, the aim was to open up Coale's (1973) "*willing*" concept to a broader range of belief systems than only religious denomination. The inclusion of religion in studies of historical fertility has not allowed us to fully understand differences in fertility decline. Catholic societies, for instance, have been both leaders (e.g. France) and laggards (e.g. Ireland, southern Netherlands) in the demographic transition. And even the incorporation of religious affiliation on the individual level, also after controlling for other factors, does not explain all differences. By including only types of religion, previous historical studies of fertility have shunned variation within religious affiliations. Diversity among members of the same denomination may have existed precisely in the austerity of their adherence to (semi)-religious beliefs and practices (Schellekens and Van Poppel 2006). Contemporary studies on religion and fertility, whether based on community-level or individual-level data, consistently show the importance of two dimensions of religion: religious affiliation (and its related values, social organization, and status position) and the extent of religiosity or adherence to religious beliefs and conformity to religious social control (Zhang 2008; Sobotka and Adigüzel 2002; Zafar, Ford and Ankomah 1995; Frejka and Westoff 2006). Today, religious affiliation itself hardly has an impact on fertility behavior anymore; instead, religiosity, often measured as frequency of church attendance, is a very strong predictor of all kinds of fertility-related behavior (Zhang 2008). The contemporary variation in religiosity, or the extent to which people adhere to beliefs, is much harder to measure for historical times.

This study has included popular religious beliefs on childbearing on the basis of a folklore questionnaire with information on beliefs and rites of incorpo-

ration of women after childbirth in more than a thousand Dutch communities. The analysis of their occurrence, content, and geographical patterning showed that these beliefs still held sway even in a Western society during the middle of the twentieth century. Semi-religious beliefs of churching existed in almost half of all rural communities included in the study, particularly among the Catholic populations. Beliefs in enchantment of young children were less common, but were still known in the forties in about a fifth of all municipalities. To be sure, such popular beliefs were rapidly vanishing and remnants of what must have been a much wider-spread phenomenon could still be found in communities in a number of isolated and strongly religious areas. They were still alive in the peripheral southern, eastern and northern rim of the Netherlands and along the line Rome-Reformation, dividing Catholic and Protestant Netherlands, where both Catholics and (Orthodox) Protestants have been said to possess a "front mentality" (Van Heek 1956). The results of a multivariate analysis including the different popular beliefs – while controlling for economic factors, family systems, and religious composition – showed that in those places where women were still churched and where remnants of beliefs in witchcraft existed, birth rates were significantly higher. The analysis shows the importance of 'communication communities' (Szreter 1996) in terms of the existence of popular beliefs, indicating higher religiosity and/or a more fatalistic attitude to life, which in turn was associated with particular demographic behavior.

By considering popular beliefs and their impact on behavior, I also meant to draw attention to the concept of cultural life scripts, i.e. the sets of culturally shared beliefs on how lives should or could take place, and discuss the opportunities and prospects of this notion for historical studies of the life course. Cultural life scripts are often understood in terms of age, quantum and sequencing norms by sociologists and psychologists. This study extended the use of this concept by showing that life scripts not only comprise age norms, but also prescriptions on social contexts, conducts, and practices surrounding life passages. The results showed that cultural life scripts, in this case surrounding childbearing, varied across communities, religious denominations and most likely also across social groups and gender. The most important outcome of the study is that the existence of cultural life scripts is real in that it guided life course decision-making and actual patterns of life course behavior. Hence, not only in the study of fertility but also for other life transitions and trajectories it is fruitful to study cultural life scripts in their own right and in conjunction with actual patterns of life course behavior. In the future, community-level popular beliefs should ideally be included in multi-level analyses of individual-level life histories.

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